

# The Enterprise

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## A Walk On The Wild Side In Falmouth's Town Forest

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Autumn is the season when we seem to feel the pull of the woods most strongly. Cooler weather has driven away most biting insects, the ground is dry underfoot, and chilly days invite one to sling a scarf around one's neck and tramp out some mileage. On October 7, a perfect crisp fall day, I joined a group of walkers, led by the Falmouth geologist and naturalist Beth Schwarzman, to make a circuit of Long Pond in a parcel called the Falmouth Town Forest. I had done this lovely walk often to stretch my legs and breathe in the pungent air, but this time I had an additional motivation: to learn something about the forest and possibly about the history of the use of this land.

A few weeks before I had attended a presentation by David Foster, the director of the Harvard Forest in Petersham, on Wildlands and Woodlands, an expansive initiative to preserve in perpetuity a significant portion of New England's forests. Decades in the planning and preparation by members of leading forestry and conservation institutions, Wildlands and Woodlands is a 50-year effort to triple, to 70 percent of New England's total area, the acreage of permanently conserved forestland—90 percent of that as "woodlands," managed for both environmental and economic benefits, and the remaining 10 percent as "wildlands," defined as "large forest landscapes . . . shaped by natural processes . . . largely free from human impact." (Quotes are from Wildlands and Woodlands, a beautifully produced large-format booklet with an accessible explanatory text, informative graphics and boxes, and beautiful photographs that would look right at home next to your coffee table books. See box "Learn More.")

Wildlands and Woodlands "addresses a quiet but pressing challenge—the growing instability of the forest base that supports human livelihood and biodiversity in the region." Two principal circumstances are driving this major effort to "safeguard the basic green infrastructure." The first is the pivotal environmental value of the New England forest, and the second is the extraordinary opportunity that presents itself to us in this historical moment. Foster began his presentation with a map showing forested areas of the United States. It was startling to see that the only significant forested area of the lower forty-eight is the broad green sweep up the eastern margin of the continent from the Southeast into Canada. Of this green smear on the map, New England forms a very significant portion; indeed, three of the most densely forested states in the union are in New England. Our forests are a globally important site of carbon storage to blunt the effects of climate change, as well as the fundamental building block of our region's economic well-being and

quality of life. New England's long tradition of conservation activism and institutional richness gives us a head start in pursuing a very ambitious and deadly serious conservation goal.

The next slide, showing the historical pattern of forest cover in New England, graphically illustrated why the time is ripe for an intense, broad-based effort to preserve our forests permanently. From a high of over 90 percent in 1600 the line representing the percentage of forest cover plunges to a low of 30 percent in 1850 as more and more land is cleared for agriculture, then makes a remarkably swift ascent over the following 100 years to another high of about 80 percent, around 1950, as farms are abandoned and the natural succession of trees takes over (a process commented upon by Thoreau). A truly remarkable "re-greening"! But unfortunately, this is not the end of the story: at the far right that line on the graph turns downward once again, reflecting the recent inroads of galloping development and fragmentation. The forests have been given back to us, but we must act quickly to accept this "gift of history," this second chance to protect our forests forever.

### **Tracking Land-Use History**

In many ways the Town Forest followed the historical trajectory just described, and clues to its past could easily be discerned by a trained eye such as that of Ms. Schwarzman. As in other areas of New England, the land surrounding Long Pond had been abandoned for farming, and in the 1930s, when it was relatively cheap, it was bought by the Fays, one of the first families of summer people, to protect their water supply—now the town's. Today's forest is about 120 years old—relatively young—and its canopy is starting to close in. Good news! It means that the bullbriers, called "devil's tangle" by earlier Cape Codders, which easily take over cleared land and whose thorns can severely lacerate your legs, become progressively sparse as they are starved of sunlight. A stone wall at the crest of the moraine slope marching off into the woods on either side of the track was most likely built as a barrier for farm animals, not to demarcate plowed fields. That the surrounding terrain had never been plowed is indicated by the presence of wintergreen, low-bush blueberry and huckleberry, and sheep laurel, which do not reproduce by seed and do not regenerate after the ground has been broken by the plow. Trees with multiple trunks are signs that some of the area was used as a woodlot; trees that regrow from sprouts were intentionally cut high so as to encourage regrowth of sprouts and, eventually, the formation of new trunks large enough to be cut again for timber.

Farther along the track we saw boulders with unnaturally square planes and sharp edges marked by regularly spaced grooves made by special tools used to crack off large blocks of stone—prized for house foundations, hitching posts, or a solid front step. The blocks would have been hauled away in the winter, when the ground was frozen and could bear the weight, in "stone boats" pulled by teams of oxen whose yokes were a beam fashioned from the extra-hard wood of the aptly named native "hornbeam." Other young native trees growing up here include sassafras, oaks (pin black, white, scarlet), American beech, white pine, hickory, American holly, and tupelo (known on Martha's Vineyard as beetlebung because its hard wood was used to make "beetles," or mauls, to bang bungs into barrels).

### **Benefits of Woodlands**

Thus this was working land for centuries after colonists arrived and cleared parts of it, and it is still the source of significant economic benefits: filtering and cleaning our water, providing

recreation, and storing large and ever-increasing volumes of carbon in its still-growing trees (old-growth forests may sequester even more carbon than younger forests). A very important goal of the Woodlands and Wildlands vision is to ensure forests' permanent protection by maximizing through careful management the measurable economic benefits to landowners and communities of preserved woodlands and to quantify and communicate the benefits more clearly. Some Falmouth woodlands may even have the potential to be managed for small-scale wood harvesting.

Highstead, a nonprofit based in Redding, Connecticut, has stepped forward to commit its resources to actively advancing the Wildlands and Woodlands vision. It is developing outreach and education programs to engage with landowners, communities, land trusts, and other entities, to help them form woodland councils and regional partnerships capable of planning and executing meaningful preservation and forest aggregation—"the bundling of many land protection projects into landscape-wide or regional efforts" (Wildlands and Woodlands, p. 27). Many such groups are already up and running.

Relevance of Woodlands to Cape

Yet the doubt may persist: In this grand 70 percent forest preservation scheme, evoking images of deep dark woods roamed by elks and bears, is a place like Falmouth really relevant? Anyone who has seen the "Losing Cape Cod" series of maps prepared by Thomas Stone, senior research associate at the Woods Hole Research Center, could be forgiven for wondering whether it wouldn't make sense for the Wildlands and Woodlands folks not to waste time with Cape Cod—it's already too heavily developed and fragmented and anyhow there's too much sand and too little forest to make a noticeable dent in the preservation goals.

Not so, says Foster, a prime mover in the W&W initiative. "W&W is about all of New England, from urban centers to deep-woods Maine. No one has given up on Cape Cod. The potential for such areas is great—conserving what is there, connecting and enlarging existing conservation areas, and engaging landowners and conservation groups in efforts that can improve their understanding and their effectiveness. We are working actively with many groups on the Vineyard." So far no regional W&W group has been formed on the Cape, but The 300 Committee, Falmouth's land trust, has as one of its goals connecting currently protected open space and trying to add linking parcels, some of which are woods. The aim is to preserve 25 to 30 percent of the town's area as open space (the W&W defines as "suburban forests" areas with 26 to 50 percent protected forest, much of it in private ownership).

In fact, the economic downturn is a huge boon to land protection because land trusts such as The 300 Committee can train their sights on parcels that would have been financially way out of reach a few years ago. Furthermore, landowners who cannot find deep-pocketed purchasers of their property may become more open to exploring the benefits of conservation easements and the potential of their protected woodlands to generate some income.

### **A Way Forward**

In the W&W vision, every tree counts toward the overall 70 percent goal, whether forming part of an urban park's canopy; providing timber and wildlife habitat in the Green Mountains of Vermont; or filtering drinking water and sheltering walking trails on Cape Cod. In a beach resort

such as Falmouth with its strong orientation toward its coastlines and the sea, people may give little thought to our woodlands. Yet a strong, connected forest infrastructure is key to the health of our ponds, bays, and the sea itself. “Bagging” all of Falmouth’s woodland trails makes a great fall outdoors project (see box for downloadable maps), and can provide a benchmark for today’s kids to observe the changes as their forests dynamically transform themselves over the next 10 . . . 30 . . . 50 years. The better we understand our wildlands and woodlands, the more highly we will value them and be motivated to protect and connect them for future generations.

### **Learn More**

Wildlands and Woodlands home site: [www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org](http://www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org). Download report text and figures, read FAQs and other background material, order a free hardcopy report, and find out how citizens and local governments, nonprofits, and landowners can become W&W partners.

“A Policy Agenda for Conserving New England’s Forests—Priorities for 2012”:  
[highsteadarboretum.org/pdfs/Policy-Agenda.pdf](http://highsteadarboretum.org/pdfs/Policy-Agenda.pdf). Policy brief released by 60 New England conservation nonprofits and land trusts.

The 300 Committee: [300committee.org](http://300committee.org): Find out about the past accomplishments and plans of Falmouth’s land trust and download maps for all of Falmouth’s trails. A map showing and describing all Falmouth open space (as of 2004) can be picked up at the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce.

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